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INFO RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO PRIORITY 8397  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 2123  
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 9629  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0593  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 000436

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DEPT FOR SCA/PB

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/13/2018

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PINR PINS BG

SUBJECT: ISLAMIST PROTESTS OF WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT POLICY  
TURN VIOLENT

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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**11. (C)** A Women's Development Policy announced by Bangladesh's Caretaker Government has prompted violent protests by some Islamist groups. These groups have organized protests in recent weeks to demand deletion of the clauses they interpret as contrary to "sharia" or the Quranic law. Caught by surprise by the strength of those opposed to the law, and already facing popular discontent over rising food prices, the government has been placed on the defensive. In an attempt to defuse tension, the government formed a committee with clerics to review the policy and recommend changes to make it compatible with the Quranic principles. These attempts have not quelled the violence, however, with protesters and police clashing April 11 ) 12, leaving hundreds injured according to media reports. The protesters have upped the ante, now demanding the resignation of the controversial Adviser for Women's Affairs. The major political parties had been largely silent on the issue, but may be tempted to use this issue to score political points. All agree that the Government has handled this issue ineptly.

PROTESTS OF WOMEN,S DEVELOPMENT POLICY TURN VIOLENT

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**2.(C)** In recent weeks, some fringe Islamist political groups, including Hizbut Tahrir and Khelafat Majlis, have organized street protests in Dhaka after Friday prayers to protest what they said are "anti-sharia" sections of the Women's Development Policy (WDP) announced March 8 by Chief Advisor Fakhruddin Ahmed. The protesters, mostly madrassa teachers and students, initially demanded deletion of the "anti-sharia" clauses. More recently, they have pushed for the removal of Women's Affairs Adviser Rasheda K. Chowdhury, who proposed the policy in the Council of Advisers and who later criticized the Islamists for criticizing the policy without having read it. On April 4, 10 and 11, protesters and police fought in Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet, leaving scores of people injured. In Chittagong, students of a large madrassa ransacked a police station on April 11 after rumors spread alleging deaths of protesters at the hands of police in Dhaka. (The rumors were false). Islamists issued threats of further protests, including a grand rally in Sylhet on April 24 preceded by protests in upazila (sub-district) headquarters the previous day.

WHAT IS THIS ALL ABOUT?

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13. (C) The WDP, drafted by the Awami League government in 1997, was officially adopted by the BNP-led four-party coalition government in 2004 with some changes. The current caretaker government restored some of the language deleted from the 1997 draft and added a few clauses making the policy more liberal. Government Advisers and women rights activists argue that the policy does not contain any provisions contravening Islamic laws or principles; A section of Islamist activists, however, claim it seeks to give men and women equal inheritance rights in violation of inheritance principle set by Sharia and the Muslim Family Law (Note: General Bangladeshi laws are secular, but the family laws of inheritance, marriages, divorce, etc. are based on religious principles for the respective religious community. End Note).

4.(C) Quoting from the WDP, Adviser Chowdhury told us it sought to ensure women's equal access to "movable and immovable properties acquired through market management" as male relatives occasionally try to take away properties earned by women. This, she said, some people misinterpreted as "equal right to inheritance." Muhammad Qamaruzzaman, Assistant Secretary General of Jammat-e-Islami (JI), termed this language "a vague alternative to inheritance," adding that property earned by a woman is automatically hers and no one else has a right to it. He claimed, without specifying, that the policy subtly incorporated some "objectionable" clauses the Muslim countries had avoided when they signed the UN Convention to End Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). While asserting that the Jamaat would never accept these changes, he said his party was refraining from agitation on this issue lest it be perceived as opposing women's rights. Some agitating Islamist leaders claimed the policy had 18

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sections contrary to sharia.

WHO IS BEHIND THE PROTESTS?  
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15. (C) Although leaders of Islamic Constitution Movement (ICM), Khelafat Andolon, Khelafat Majlis, Hizbut Tahrir, and a faction of Islami Oikko Jote (IOJ) are leading the anti-WDP movement, some press accounts suggest participation of JI supporters in the agitation. JI leaders acknowledge that some of their supporters might have been involved in the protest, but assert the party was not involved and had instead condemned the violence. The Awami League has attributed the violent demonstrations solely to JI despite open leadership of the demonstrations by other Islamist leaders. One Awami League leader accused the government of applying a double standard, by initially allowing the Islamic groups to defy the ban on public gatherings imposed as part of the state of emergency. On April 12, police arrested 17 people on allegation of their involvement in violence in Dhaka the previous day and sent them to prison. That said, on April 13 ICM organized a human chain in downtown Dhaka to press home their demand for scrapping "anti-Islamic" parts of the WDP and removal of Women Affairs Adviser Chowdhury defying the ban on demonstrations under the state of emergency. ICM leaders threatened "hard action" if their demands are not met by April 17. Police did not try to break the 30-minute long human chain that caused halt to movement of traffic on a key road.

WHAT IS THE WAY OUT?  
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6.(C) Responding to the initial agitation, Law and Religious Affairs Adviser AF Hassan Ariff held meetings with Islamic clerics to assure them that the WDP did not have any anti-shariah clauses and the government did not intend to promulgate any anti-religious legislation. On March 27, Ariff and three other advisers formed a committee with Islamic clerics to review the policy and submit recommendations within 21 days for removal of any clauses contrary to Islamic

principles. Senior military officials told us that they had pushed the Council of Advisers to form this commission. Adviser Chowdhury, whom her colleagues did not consult before forming this committee, expressed "shock and disappointment" at this development. Chowdhury said the Council's Rules of Business also did not allow individual advisers to form a committee to review a policy approved by the Council as a whole. Moreover, the members of this committee were not known for any past role in favor of women rights, she said \* a point we have heard echoed by other rights activists.

¶7. (C) Defending the formation of the committee, Adviser Ariff told us that its aim was to defuse tension and remove misunderstanding about the policy. "Since we know the WDP has nothing anti-Islamic we thought an examination by Islamic clerics would help end the controversy." Ariff said the amendments to the 2004 policy were merely cosmetic in nature and the caretaker government shouldn't have reopened the issue for "eyewash." Such unnecessary actions might keep the government busy with unnecessary "side issues" and cause delay to the preparations for the parliamentary elections. He, however, hoped the issue would die down with the Islamic scholars coming up with their observations. Ariff noted that he was cheered at a mosque in Chittagong for his perceived role in "defending" Islamic values. Ariff was out of Bangladesh (in Saudi Arabia, negotiating terms for the 2009 Hajj) when the latest violence broke out.

¶8. (C) Major General Golam Mohammad, the Director General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), told the DCM April 13 that the government's decision to push through the new Women's Development Policy had been a blunder. Since the protests had turned violent, DGFI had tried to convince the organizers of the demonstrations to avoid confrontation with police. DGFI was surprised when the organizers admitted that they were unable to control their followers. DGFI is also concerned that "outsiders" were trying to fan the flames of protest to weaken the government.

COMMENT  
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¶9. (C) Although the Council of Advisers unanimously approved  
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the amended women development policy, there is a clear difference of opinion within the Council about the advisability of the caretaker government taking on this issue and diverting attention from its main objective, holding free and fair parliamentary elections. This difference is likely to grow now that protests have turned violent. Given the delicacy of an issue involving women's rights vis-a-vis long-existing family laws based on religious principles, most government advisers seem sensitive to the sentiments expressed by the clerics. So far, the mainstream political parties have been largely silent, content to see the caretaker government on the hot seat. For the parties, this is a way to remind the government that it runs risks by trying to do too much during this caretaker period. If the controversy expands further, others may seek to hijack the protests for other unrelated purposes. Most observers agree that the CTG erred in introducing these changes without having a clear strategy for implementing them.

Moriarty